Society of Young Nigerian Writers

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History Explorer
Kanuri people

Total population

4,000,000 (estimate)

Regions with significant populations

Nigeria, southeast Niger, western Chad and northern Cameroon.

Nigeria 3,000,000 (1985) [1]

Does not include 200,000 Mangari

480,000 (1993)

Chad 380,000 of which are Kanembu [2]

subgroup

400,000 (1997)

Niger Includes 100,000 Mangari, 40,000 [3]

Tumari, 20,000 Bla Bla

Cameroon 56,000 (1982) [4]

Languages
Kanuri language

Religion

majority: Islam, small minority: African traditional religion, Oriental Orthodoxy[citation needed]

Related ethnic groups

Kanembu people, Manga people

The Kanuri people (Kanouri, Kanowri, also Yerwa and several subgroup names) are an African ethnic group living largely in the lands of the former Bornu Empire: Bornu state in northeastern Nigeria, southeast Niger, western Chad and northern Cameroon[^5]. Those generally termed Kanuri include several subgroups and dialect groups, some of whom feel themselves distinct from the Kanuri. Most trace their origins to ruling lineages of the medieval Kanem-Bornu, its client states or provinces. In contrast to neighboring Toubou or Zaghawa pastoralists, Kanuri groups have traditionally been sedentary, engaging in farming, fishing the Lake Chad basin, and engaged in trade and salt processing.[^3]
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Names and subgroups

Kanuri peoples include several subgroups, and identify by different names in some regions. The Kanuri language, which derived from Kanembu, was the major language of the Borno Empire. Kanuri remains a major language in southeastern Niger, northeastern Nigeria and northern Cameroon but in Chad it is limited to handfuls of speakers in urban centers.\(^6\)

The largest population of Kanuri reside in the northeast corner of Nigeria, where the ceremonial Emirate of Borno traces direct decent for the Kanem-Bornu empire, founded sometime before 1000 CE. Some 3 million Kanuri speakers live in Nigeria, not including the some 200,000 speakers of the Manga or Mangari dialect.\(^1\) The Nga people in Bauchi State trace their origins to a Kanuri diaspora.\(^7\)
In southeastern Niger, where they form the majority of the sedentary population, the Kanuri are commonly called *Beri Beri* (a Hausa name). The 400,000 Kanuri population in Niger includes the *Manga* or *Mangari* subgroup, numbering some 100,000 (1997) in the area east of Zinder, who regard themselves as distinct from the *Beri Beri*. Around 40,000 (1998) members of the *Tumari* subgroup, sometimes called Kanembu in Niger, are a distinct Kanuri subgroup living in the N’guigmi area, and are distinct from the Chadian Kanembu people.

In the Kaour escarpment oasis of eastern Niger, the Kanuri are further divided into the *Bla Bla* subgroup, numbering some 20,000 (2003), and are the dominant ethnic group in the salt evaporation and trade industry of Bilma.

Kanuri speak the Kanuri language, or one of its related languages a member of the Nilo-Saharan language family. Divisions include the Manga, Tumari, and Bilma dialects of Central Kanuri, and the more distinct Kanembu language.

Inheriting the religious and cultural traditions of the Kanem-Borno state, Kanuri peoples are predominantly Sunni Muslim.

In Chad, Kanembu speakers differentiate themselves from the large Kanuri ethnicity. The Kanembu are centered in Lac Prefecture and southern Kanem Prefecture. Although Kanuri, which derived from Kanembu, was the major language of the Borno Empire, in Chad Kanuri language speakers are limited to handfuls of speakers in urban centers. Kanuri remains a major language in southeastern Niger, northeastern Nigeria, and northern Cameroon.

In the early 1980s, the Kanembu constituted the greatest part of the population of Lac Prefecture, but some Kanembu also lived in Chari-Baguirmi Prefecture. Once the core ethnic group of the
Kanem-Borno Empire, whose territories at one time included northeastern Nigeria and southern Libya, the Kanembu retain ties beyond the borders of Chad. For example, close family and commercial ties bind them with the Kanuri of northeastern Nigeria. Within Chad, many Kanembu of Lac and Kanem prefectures identify with the Alifa of Mao, the governor of the region in precolonial times.[6]

Originally a pastoral people, the Kanuri were one of many Nilo-Saharan groups indigenous to the Central South Sahara, beginning their expansion in the area of Lake Chad in the late 7th century, and absorbing both indigenous Nilo-Saharan and Chadic (Afro-Asiatic) speakers. According to Kanuri tradition, Sef, son of Dhu Ifazan of Yemen, arrived in Kanem in the ninth century and united the population into the Sayfawa dynasty. This tradition however, is likely a product of later Islamic influence, reflecting the association with their Arabian origins in the Islamic era. Evidence of indigenous state formation in the Lake Chad area dates back to the early first century B.C. (ca. 800 B.C.) at Zilum.

**Religion**

Kanuri became Muslims in the 11th century, Kanem became a centre of Muslim learning and the Kanuri soon controlled all the area surrounding Lake Chad and a powerful empire called Kanem-Bornu Empire which reached its height in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when they ruled much of Central Africa.
Traditional state

Following the downfall of the Kanem-Bornu Empire and the Scramble for Africa in the 19th century, the Kanuri were divided under the rule of the British, French and German African empires.

Despite the loss of the Kanuri led state, the Shehu of Borno continues as ruler *Emirate or Sultanate of Borno*. This traditional Kanuri/Kanembu Emirate at Borno maintains a ceremonial rule of the Kanuri people, based in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, but acknowledged by the 4 million Kanuri in neighboring countries. The Shehu ("Sultan") of Borno draws his authority from a state founded before 1000 CE, the Kanem-Bornu Empire.[12] The current ruling line, the al-Kanemi dynasty, dates to the accession of Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanemi in the early 19th century, displacing the Sayfawa dynasty which had ruled from around 1300 CE. The 19th Shehu of Borno Mustapha Umar El-Kanemi, died in February 2009,[13] and was succeeded by Alhaji Kyari Garbai.[14]

Political leaders

In Nigeria, famous post-independence Kanuri leaders include the politicians Kashim Ibrahim, Ibrahim Imam, Kashim Ibrahim-Imam, Baba Gana Kingibe, former GNPP leader Waziri Ibrahim, and the former military ruler, Sani Abacha. In Niger, Kanuri political leaders include the former Prime Minister of Niger Mamane Oumarou, and the former President of Niger, Tandja Mamadou.
Kanuri regionalism in Nigeria

A Nigeria specific small Kanuri nationalist movement emerged in 1950s, centred around Bornu. Some "Pan-Kanowri" nationalists claimed an area of 532,460 km² for the territory of what they called "Greater Kanowra", including the modern day prefectures of Lac and Kanem in Chad, Far North Province in Cameroon and the departments of Diffa and Zinder in Niger.[15]

In 1954, the Borno Youth Movement (BYM) was founded, and played a role as a mass regionalist political party up through the end of colonialism though it petered out in at independence.[16][17]

References

1. Ethnologue Nigeria overview.
2. Ethnologue Chad overview
4. Ethnologue Cammeroon
8. Ethnologue KRT.
9. Ethnologue BMS.

12. ^ al-Kanemi dynasty: Sultanate of Borno


**External links**